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ABSTRACT

An address given by the Director-General of UNESCO is presented. The address had as its main focus the progress of the committee's literacy efforts throughout the world. It is pointed out that some 10 projects have been undertaken. The number of persons attending the literacy courses has risen from 5,500 to about 400,000 during the period 1967 to 1971 and the number of teachers has increased from 200 to 8,500 during the same period. The approach used in teaching literacy is one oriented to the solutions of the problems arising out of a particular environment. Thus, the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic, vocational training and the rudiments of socio-economic training are closely integrated. Special attention has been given to the evaluation of results; a handbook was prepared for the evaluation of experimental projects in functional literacy training. The point is made that the phase of post-literacy work will require a great deal of attention on the members of UNESCO. It is suggested that regional groups be set up, under the authority of the Committee, for the purpose of guiding literacy activities. (CK)

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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr. René Maheu

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(Unesco)

at the opening of the third session of the
International Consultative Liaison Committee for Literacy

Paris, 27 March 1972

AC 012 623

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure to me to welcome here the distinguished men and women who, despite their heavy responsibilities, have been good enough to put their competence and experience at Unesco's service by participating in the third session of the International Consultative Liaison Committee for Literacy.

I would also offer greetings to the representatives of our sister organizations of the United Nations system and to the observers from intergovernmental and non-governmental international organizations who have been at pains to show by their presence the interest they take in literacy activities.

Owing to a combination of circumstances which I regret, the International Consultative Liaison Committee for Literacy has not met since September 1968, so its first concern as proposed in item 4 of its agenda will doubtless be to review briefly what has been done in regard to literacy since its second session. To facilitate your task in this connexion, the Secretariat has prepared two working papers for you: one on the evolution, present situation and future prospects of adult literacy training (ED-72/CONF.42/4) and one on the action taken on the recommendations made by the Committee at its second session (ED-72/CONF.42/3).

In 1968, when your Committee held its second session, the Experimental World Literacy Programme (on which the Organization concentrates the greater part of its energies in the domain you are considering) had only just started. But in the following year, 1969, it became apparent that the execution of the Programme was proceeding at too slow a rate, that despite the efforts made by Member States and the Organization alike there was a regrettable gap between the targets set and the results obtained and that measures must be taken to right the situation. After informing the Executive Board of it, I decided to seek authoritative opinions on the matter and for this purpose I called a meeting in Paris from 1 to 5 December 1969 attended by representatives of the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) and the Specialized Agencies concerned, eminent consultants, the national directors of the projects and the principal technical advisers. On the basis of the recommendations made at the close of this meeting, missions consisting of representatives of the governments, UNDP and Unesco were immediately sent out to evaluate the projects under way, which permitted of a revision of objectives in terms of the needs and of the means which it was known would be available. This step marked a decisive turning point in the conduct of the Experimental World Programme, since when it has steadily grown.

Thus since the Committee's second session, some ten new projects have been undertaken, of which four are being carried out in co-operation with the United

Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Six get aid from UNDP, while four are financed from funds-in-trust. Again the number of persons attending literacy courses, which was only 5,500 in 1967 for all the projects combined, is now in the region of 400,000, sixty per cent of whom are young people between the ages of 14 and 24, while the number of literacy instructors increased from 200 in 1967 to 8,500 in 1971.

This quantitative expansion was accompanied by no less significant qualitative results. As regards methodology in particular, the Experimental Programme has made an original contribution which, even outside literacy training proper, is likely to have repercussions on the wider domain of adult education, and even on education systems generally. In effect it has permitted the adoption of an approach whereby education is no longer provided, or indeed imposed from without, but is in some sort of secretion engendered by the environment itself and oriented to the solution of the problems arising in that environment. Looked at in this perspective, functional literacy is conceived of as a method of all-round training in which the learning of reading, writing and arithmetic, vocational training and the rudiments of socio-economic training are closely integrated.

This education "to measure" has, as may be imagined, produced an immense diversification of programmes and teaching equipment and in the recruiting of instructors. Thus over 80 different programmes are in use in the experimental projects now in progress and a great variety of teaching materials has had to be devised. As regards the instructors, they are increasingly coming from the production sector, which is now taking the initiative in seeking assistance in this respect from the specialists in charge of the execution of the projects.

To adapt personnel training to the exigencies of the programmes thus diversified, it has likewise been necessary to devise original methods, of which a notable example is what is called the "operational seminar", a practical training course arranged on the actual ground and under the actual conditions of the operation itself and drawing largely on local resources.

Next, an important place is given to the evaluation of the results. Hence special attention has been given to progressively improving the methods of evaluation, notably through the assistance of a Permanent Panel of evaulation experts and the national and international officials in charge of evaluation activities. The first step was the preparation in 1969 of a handbook for the evaluation of experimental projects in functional literacy training. Next in 1970 a series of indicators was worked out designed to make it possible to measure the results and analyse the changes which may be attributed to functional literacy training. Finally, in 1971, a standardized system was elaborated for the presentation of data to assist towards comparability at the international level. Further, the results of the evaluation operations have been amplified by a diversity of research operations directed to determining the most effective methods of functional literacy training.

Beyond the limits of the Experimental Programme, the action pursued by Unesco to encourage national efforts is undoubtedly not unconnected with the fact that, since 1968, twenty-two Member States have adopted legislation on

literacy training. The objects of these measures are, notably, to create agencies, services, national committees or literacy training centres, to enlist the educated classes for adult literacy training, to include literacy training programmes in development plans, to give literacy training services independent budgets, to award certificates to new literates, to invite private businesses to organize literacy training courses for their staffs, etc. In one Member State, for example, there is a decree providing that every agricultural production unit must have a functional literacy training centre directing the bodies responsible for recruiting unskilled labour to give priority to candidates enrolled at a literacy training centre. In another country illiterate citizens under the age of 45 employed in the industrial sector are required by law to attend the literacy training courses organized for their benefit.

However encouraging these results may be, we cannot forget the magnitude of the needs to be satisfied and of the tasks which still have to be tackled in this field. Although the progress made to date has reduced the illiteracy rate in the adult population of the world as a whole, the number of illiterates has continued to increase in absolute terms. Between 1950 and 1970, the illiteracy rate fell from 44.3% to 34.2% and the number of literate adults rose from 879 million to 1,504 million, but the number of illiterate adults increased from 700 to 783 million. We must therefore redouble our efforts and plan action on a broad front with the aim of bringing about a steady decrease in the number of people who lack a tool that they must have if they are to make an effective contribution to the development of their community and achieve full human dignity in their own lives. The initial goal which I have proposed to Member States in the medium-term outline plan (1973-1978), which will be submitted to the General Conference at its seventeenth session, is that the number of illiterates in 1980 should be no higher than it was in 1970; given the pace of population growth, this would have the effect of reducing the illiteracy rate to 27.7%.

Unesco, for its part, will endeavour first of all to bring the Experimental World Programme to a successful conclusion. However, since the projects carried out within this programme are expected to be nearing completion in 1973, we should start thinking now about the measures we must take in order to continue the task we have begun. Above all, at the end of the Experimental Programme we must make a detailed evaluation of the results obtained, both in respect of teaching methods and from the socio-economic standpoint, and communicate the findings to governments, financing bodies, those sectors of the community concerned with the matter and, more widely, the general public.

Since the Experimental Programme is, by definition, an activity of limited scope which is intended to lead up to action on a larger scale, an analysis of this kind should serve as a basis for the preparation of a true World Literacy Programme, whose broad outline would be based on the concepts and methods developed as a result of the implementation of the Experimental Programme. The logical sequel of the latter would be a series of national literacy activities integrated in a world-wide programme involving the mobilization, at the international level, of all our human and material resources, which are necessary to the implementation of the national programmes.

Thanks to the new country programming procedure adopted by UNDP - which, as you know, consists in preparing an overall plan for international assistance,

geared to national development plans, after identifying the needs and priorities pertaining specifically to each of the countries concerned - Member States are already able to give the necessary priority to literacy in their own programmes. Of the nineteen countries whose programmes were approved by the Governing Council of UNDP at its session in January 1972, seven have included functional literacy projects in these programmes. I am sure that governments will continue to approach the problem in this way and that this trend will become even more pronounced, for it is undoubtedly in harmony with a powerful movement towards popular emancipation.

There is a further important phase during which Unesco will have to give assistance to Member States - that of post-literacy work. It would indeed be deplorable if new literates forgot what they had learnt thanks to the Experimental Programme, simply for want of practice. It is therefore essential to provide them with the means of consolidating their knowledge and using it effectively in their daily lives. This means providing them with reading matter and promoting the establishment of press and library services in rural areas, or their extension, where they exist. It is particularly necessary to work out a systematic educational programme leading to some form of life-long education linked to the increasingly complex problems of continuing development.

All these activities are very costly, and their success largely depends, in the last analysis, on the financial resources available. Unesco, for its part, will continue to seek new sources of financing by appealing to bodies responsible for organizing multilateral and bilaterial financial assistance and by calling for voluntary contributions. The experimental functional literacy projects are already receiving aid from UNDP and several public or private bodies to which I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude: the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), the Swiss International Foundation for Accelerated Training of Modern Man (FOPOTEC) and the Secondary School Pupils' Association of Denmark and Norway. The Organization is still ready to explore any financing possibilities which may be suggested. It is keeping in close touch, for example, with the World Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which is following with interest the evaluation results of the experimental projects under way.

Unesco is endeavouring, at the same time, to stimulate public interest by celebrating International Literacy Day once a year and by awarding, on this occasion, the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Prize and the Nadezhda K. Krupskaya Prize for outstanding work in the field of literacy. In accordance with a recommendation made by the Committee, a Round Table of bankers, economists and financiers was organized in Rome in February 1969 in order to stimulate those concerned with economics to take a greater interest in the financing of literacy work. It is interesting to note that this Round Table reached the conclusion that, in development programmes, literacy work should be regarded as an investment like any other. Its conclusions, which were very constructive, were stated even more clearly at a European Round Table on the integration of Literacy work in economic development projects, which was organized by Unesco at Turin in April 1970 with the assistance of the Giovanni Agnelli Foundation and was attended by representatives of the Italian Government, major industrial concerns, official bodies and public utilities, as well as delegates from educational and training establishments.

Among the sources of financial assistance on which Unesco could draw, there is one in particular to which I must draw your attention - the Special Account for voluntary contributions for literacy. This fund, which was set up in 1966 thanks to a generous gift from the Shahinshah of Iran, has received no contribution of any importance for almost two years, and all the money has now been spent. Some means of adding to it regularly must be found. Following the example of the practices of Unicef and of the World Freedom-from-Hunger Campaign, it might be possible to organize, in connexion with International Literacy Day, which is celebrated in many countries, an international collection, the proceeds of which would be paid into the Special Account. We might also consider appealing, with the support of certain members of the Committee, to private associations like the Lions Club or Rotary International. I should be grateful if you would go into this problem.

To take a more general view of the matter, one way of tackling the problem of obtaining the large sums which would be required for the implementation of a World Literacy Programme would be to set up an International Literacy Foundation under the auspices of Unesco. This Foundation would be responsible for raising large loans, fully redeemable at six months' notice; the amounts so obtained would be invested, and the interest earned would be paid to the Organization in full, to finance its participation in the Programme. The Foundation might also advise the Director-General on any financing questions within its province. On this point too, I should be very grateful for your advice.

Lastly, I wish to draw your attention to Item 7 of the Agenda, which invites you to consider the question of the future rôle of the Committee and the form its action should take.

May I suggest that in this connexion you should consider whether it would be desirable to set up regional groups, under the authority of the Committee, each of which would have its own co-ordinator responsible, on the one hand, for keeping in touch with the members of his group and with the Secretariat and, on the other hand, for stimulating the interest of public authorities, financing organizations and information media in order to ensure that they attach due importance to literacy work. Furthermore, in order to increase the participation of socio-professional circles in the financing of literacy work, the Committee's regional groups could propose that Round Tables on this subject be convened in their respective regions.

I make this suggestion because, if you will allow me to remind you of the fact, your Committee, which is composed of such influential persons, is not merely a consultative committee to which I can refer for advice; it is, and must be, at the same time a promotion committee, determined to play its part in world affairs.

Such are the main questions, Ladies and Gentlemen, on which I should welcome your wise guidance. I should like to thank you in advance for your help, while extending to you my most sincere wishes for the successful outcome of your deliberations.

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